The University of Chicago

THE MEANING OF THE CHURCH IN THE THOUGHT OF CALVIN

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE DIVINITY SCHOOL IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

1938

By

HENRI REUBELT PEARCY

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This dissertation was written with the aim of achieving an understanding of the meaning of the Church in the thought of Calvin as revealed in his writings and suggested by the achievements won in his struggles in Geneva. The subject has been treated under six topics chosen to cover all essential phases of a balanced consideration.

I

Calvin's thought of the Church was embodied in an essentially Augustinian outlook on history. History for Calvin constituted the story of mankind from the beginning of the race with Adam and Eve until the end of the world of mankind at the coming of Christ to effect the consummation of the affairs of the whole universe. History endures throughout time, which is an island in the ocean of eternity, so to speak. In and behind all history is reflected the struggle of mankind with Satan and his minions. Prior to the beginning of time lay an eternity. In it God had elected certain angels and men whom he willed to save out of a situation that involved rebellion and sinful living on the part of many angels and all mankind beginning with Adam.

The struggle reflected in and behind all history did not for Calvin involve God in any lessened authority or loss of power. In spite of this struggle God was imagined by Calvin to retain absolute omnipotence. God foresaw and permitted the revolt of Satan; he also has permitted Satan first to bring about the fall of Adam and to harass fallen men from the time of that fall. But God has constantly kept a bridle on Satan and could cause him to cease his depravations and the exercise of tyranny over men, if it so pleased him.

In two ways the tyranny of Satan over men is exercised. On the one hand he has involved all mankind in the corruption of human nature through the fall of Adam, inevitability of decease being reckoned part of this corruption; this tyranny is a <u>fait accompli</u>.

On the other hand he exercises tyranny over men by confusing their sensibilities.

But Satan had but just effected the ruin of Adam, when God's plan to checkmate that evil and ultimately all other evil in the universe went into operation. As for mankind, the plan of God involved establishing his Church on earth. The Church was begun with Adam the sinner. Adam had been created with a knowledge of divine law. In the very constitution of Adam's nature there was from the beginning a comprehensive mental disposition appreciative of righteousness and equity; this was the Natural Law. But besides this inborn Law, Adam had been given a personal precept in Eden with regard to a specific matter, in order that he might realize that God had a mastery over him. Satan caused Adam to disobey this precept and thereby plunged him into that ruin which involved loss of the image of God, the uncorrupted excellence of human nature which shone in Adam before his defection.[1] The aim of the Church from the beginning of it was to provide a way for the Elect to recover that excellence of human nature. Education through provision of the divine will in the form of Law was the means provided by God for the achievement of that aim. Portions of a Law constituted essentially of precepts and doctrines were given from generation to generation of the descendants of Adam until the massive Law of the Jews was completed. Law, Prophets, Psalms, and Histories came to form "the Word of the Lord to his ancient people." "Under the term Law, Christ includes the whole doctrine by which God governed his ancient Church."[2] The correct worship of God constituted a most necessary phase of obedience to this Law. "We are to follow this one principle in worshipping God--simply to obey his Word."[3] But besides worship there were in the Church before the coming of Christ sacraments also; "circumcision . . . . purifications and sacrifices. . . . . Other rites of the Mosaic Law . . . . were the sacraments of the Jews until the advent of Christ."[4]

The coming of Christ to earth in the flesh was to be the renovation of "the human race."[5] "His death was the commencement

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[1]John Calvin, Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia, XXXIII, 71, in Corpus Reformatorum, ed. G. Baum et al. (Brunswigae Schwetschke et filium, 1871), LI, 71. Hereafter the abbreviation C.R. will be used in this abstract to indicate this work.

[2]Ibid., LXXV, 253.

[3]Ibid., LXX, 476.

[4]Ibid., V, 278.

[5]Ibid., LI, 193; LXXIX, 180.

of a well-regulated condition, and the full restoration of the world."[1] This restoration was made possible by the suffering and death of Christ on the cross; "we are not admitted to full and sure communion with God, unless in so far as Christ unites us."[2] For the first time in human history it was possible for a descendant of Adam to be "delivered from the tyranny of Satan," regenerated by the Spirit, and privileged to begin a new life. Though Satan strove with all his might to impede the commencement of the Gospel, the Church of the ages had come into its full possibilities with this personal triumph of Christ. However, Satan did not cease making effort to pull all mankind down to perdition with himself. He continued to invade and assail the Church with a view to destroying the salvation Christ had made possible for the Elect. Only a good start had been made on the way to the realization of the redemption of the Elect.

Hence, the Elect must be made aware that Satan does not permit "free passage to come to the Lord but labors by innumerable offences to hinder them, and to turn them out of the right way . . . . they must <u>contend</u> to come unto the blessedness of his Kingdom."[3] It is this activistic determination that marks the life of the individual and the life of the Church. Calvin believed there is necessary a process through which it is predestined the Elect must pass, largely on their own vehement initiative, out of a world of woe and sin into the bright blessedness of God hereafter. On the one hand Calvin saw no meritoriousness in any work of man; on the other hand he believed a man <u>must</u> work with desperate persistence and patience if he is to achieve the salvation to which he has been elected. The necessity for defense of the Kingdom of Christ is a matter of self-defense on the part of the Elect; the Elect do not fight the Devil primarily for the honor of God: he will get honor out of the victory, to be sure. But if the Elect do not fight for the Kingdom of Christ, they will not win their own eternal salvation. To be sure, the Spirit gives the stirring of will to the Elect; otherwise there would not be the slightest effort on the part of the Elect in their own behalf. But the Elect, for all that, must work and fight and

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[1] <u>Ibid</u>., LXXV, 293.

[2] <u>Johannis Calvini Opera Selecta</u>, ed. P. Barth, and G. Niesel (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1928), III, 484. Hereafter the abbreviation <u>B.N.</u> will be used to indicate this work.

[3] <u>C.R.</u>, LXXVII, 34.

suffer their way to salvation, Christ having opened the way, the Spirit giving constant volition and power throughout the career.

Calvin had no particular concern about Antichrist; for him Antichrist meant more than the pope at Rome. It meant the tyranny exercised by Satan in the heresies and in the invasions of Mohammedanism as well as in the corruptions of the Papacy. There was no particular concern for him about Antichrist, inasmuch as God is omnipotent; and Christ, in whom God is and works, will destroy Antichrist in due time, not by violence, but by the simple use of the Word itself.[1]

II

Calvin thought of the Church fundamentally as one who had inherited a juridical point of view with regard to it. In his education, which was broad and to a considerable degree humanistic, he encountered a powerful tradition saturated with the thought that Law is fundamental in Christianity. He made his own interpretation of this tradition; but he made it his own.

The two powerful strains of juridical thinking that constituted this heritage were the Jewish and the Roman. The Jews had had a State-Church. The early Christian leaders were profoundly influenced by this fact. Paul, with all his appreciation of the pneumatic element in Christianity, retained the juridical point of view. The Law of Moses for Paul was still holy, spiritual and good.[2] Paul gave to Christianity its attachment to Stoic philosophy in incorporating the idea of Natural Law. In Romans[3] he recognized in all men an inborn mental disposition appreciative of righteousness and equity. Paul claimed for civil government a divine sanction. The synagogue was the place of the first contacts Paul and other broadminded leaders of the Church had with the Gentiles, and in the organization of the groups of converts into churches Paul's first act was to secure elders to be responsible for order and discipline. Both Pauline and Petrine communities, for that matter, used customary Jewish organization and discipline from the beginning.[4]

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[1] C.R., LIX, 620; LXXX, 201.

[2] Rom. 7: 12 f. [3] Ibid., 2: 14 f.

[4] Adolf Harnack, The Constitution and Law of the Church In the First Two Centuries (London: Williams and Norgate, 1910), pp. 229 f.

Ignatius had developed the thought of the bishop presiding in a college of presbyters as God's representative and the presbyters the sanhedrin of God.[1] He claimed additional revelation about centering the unity of the Church about the bishop.[2] This emphasis meant the beginning of the Catholic Church in fact. Cyprian later elaborated the thought, and established the principle of conciliar control of the Catholic Church by bishops.[3] Irenaeus furthered this episcopal development and brought again to the attention of the Church the importance of the Law of Nature which the Lord did not abrogate.[4]

The Roman strain of juridical thinking came into Christian thought when the Church became a department of the Roman State. The Jewish heritage harmonized with the changed status that came with the toleration and favor of Constantine. Imperial ideas as to control of religious institutions came over to the bishops quite naturally; the transformation of the concept Church was inevitable. Augustine in his De civitate Dei gave another turn to the development of the idea of the Church. He had not meant to identify the civitas Dei with the Catholic Church. But for him it found "a real though imperfect embodiment in the historic visible church which, so far as it contains true saints, is even now to be identified with the regnum Dei."[5] Out of the Dark Ages emerged politically minded bishops as master of the Church. Not until late in the sixteenth century, however, did a Catholic authority of high rank frankly identify the Catholic Church and the Kingdom of God.[6] Constantine and Augustine had contributed to the development of the idea; with the papacy came its practical realization.[7]

Against this might and particularly against the scandal of the divided papacy there arose a challenge of tremendous significance for the Church. The conciliarist theory was well established

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[1] Epistle to the Trallians, chap. iii.

[2] Epistle to the Philadelphians, chap. vii.

[3] Epistle LI, sec. 6, 7. [4] Adv. Haer. iii, 23.

[5] F. W. Loetscher, "Saint Augustine's Conception of the State," Church History, IV (March, 1935), 34.

[6] Renato Freschi, Giovanni Calvino (Milan: A. Corticelli, 1934), II, 586.

[7] A. Robertson, Regnum Dei (London: Methuen and Co., 1901), p. 225.

by the great Frenchman, Jean Quidort of Paris.[1] Theorists within the Church from his day forward sought new ways for controlling the Church. Marsiglio of Padua advanced the idea that the Church must be subject to the will of a democratic community. There was for all these theorists, however, an unquestioned acceptance of the ideas that the Church must be governed and that Law is necessary for that purpose. There was introduced into the thinking of the conciliarists, however, another idea that was to have tremendous force, namely, the idea that the Scriptures constitute the really ultimate seat of authority in religion.

Out of his training in Roman Law Calvin gained a great respect for order as essential in society. The rights of men, original and inviolable as they are, are dependent not merely upon the recognition on the part of all men that natural rights are original and inviolable, but more particularly upon the maintenance of politico-social order whereby recognition will issue in respect. Coercion, however, Calvin came to know, is absolutely necessary if order is to be had; coercion is necessary because mankind, through loss of the original excellence of nature by Adam, is filled with passions that must be curbed by force if confusion and violence in society are to be kept down.

Calvin recognized in this need a matter in which God had been interested when he purposed to express to all humanity his Common Grace. There is no descendant of Adam who would be free of temptation and impulsion to express himself violently in society if there were not provided divine curbs. God inwardly restrains all men by means of his own choosing. The first one is shame; the second is fear of the laws of the State. The third is a belief "that a virtuous course of life is advantageous." The fourth is the determination of some men "to confine the vulgar to their duty."[2] The operation of Providence in the field of civil government was in Calvin's view specific and meticulous. Magistrates have "a commission from God . . . . are invested with divine authority"; they act as his substitutes and "represent the person of God."[3] In the Natural Law there is the prompting of men in the

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[1] J. T. McNeill, "The Emergence of Conciliarism," Medieval and Historiographical Essays in Honor of James Westfall Thompson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1938), pp. 292 f.

[2] B.N., III, 275. [3] Ibid., V, 474.

direction of order through government of a political and civil sort.

But beyond the discipline provided by the State, a discipline of the purely vulgar instincts of men, Calvin saw the need of a discipline that would reach to the depth of man's nature and contribute to the effort necessary on the part of the Elect to recover that excellence of human nature lost by Adam in his first temptation.

But this need of discipline that will reach to the depth of the nature of the Elect involves an educative process. God has purposed just such an arrangement whereby the Elect may receive the great benefit of a fellowship. Such a fellowship is the Visible Church. Here is provided, as it were, a scaffolding within which the real edifice of the image of God is to be rebuilt in each of the Elect. In fact, two activities must be carried forward concurrently to make the educative process complete from the standpoint of the Visible Church itself. Those two activities are expressed in the Ministry of the Word and in Discipline. The teaching function is imperative in order that the Law of God may be known by the Elect; but the function of discipline is equally important.

Out of his recognition of the importance of discipline for the sake of the Elect Calvin came to develop in his organization of the Reformation at Geneva an arrangement that has been determinative of the course of Protestantism and influential to a high degree even upon the modern theory of political government. While reserving to the Ministry of the Church a unique function and honor, he at the same time introduced lay representatives into the government of the Church as equal in disciplining power to the ministers themselves.[1] Among the most significant consequences of the Reformation has been the extension to the laity of responsibility in the management of the Church. Two factors have been responsible for this result, namely, the doctrine of the priesthood of Christian believers and the establishment of the principle of administration of the Visible Church by representative bodies employing the powers provided in the Word of God. This pair of factors meant the end of any thought of magical significance to the

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[1]Cf. G. D. Henderson, The Scottish Ruling Elder (London: James Clarke and Co., 1935), passim. Charles Hodge, Discussions of Church Polity (New York: Chas. Scribner's Sons, 1878), pp. 267 ff.

action of ministers in the administration of Sacraments; it further meant the constitutionalization of the Church.

Luther had championed the doctrine of the general priesthood of Christian believers. Calvin in placing the laity in a position of responsibility along with the Ministry for disciplining the Church merely did what Luther should have done to fulfill the implications of his conception of the priesthood of all believers. Doumergue in his great work on Calvin went to the extreme of practical denial of great influence by Bucer upon Calvin while Courvoisier[1] went to the other extreme of making Calvin dependent on Bucer for his thought regarding the lay representatives of the Church in her courts. Already in 1537 Calvin had made specific reference to the divine authorization of the eldership;[2] it was not necessary for him to wait for any influence from Bucer to arrive at that conclusion. Charles Hodge pointed out that the laymen whom Calvin placed in position of power in the courts of the Church were not at all intended to be of the same order with the Ministry. Instead, they were intended to possess their offices as representatives of the people of the Church-community.[3] The nature and extent of their powers is determined by their being representatives of the people; ministers are assigned by the Word of God unique function as presbyters in a truly priestly sense.[4]

In his thinking with regard to the Church as administered by men, Calvin had in mind at all times the representative principle which found support in the Word. But when his thought turned to the Church as that institution in which Christ has a personal and hidden rule, the monarchical principle alone was given consideration.

III

When Calvin thought of God he thought of the Sovereign of the universe. Christ for Calvin was imagined as taking the place of God throughout history, throughout time. The Kingdom of Christ was that entity which for him naturally was the obverse of the Church conceived in its operation under the charge of human repre-

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[1] Jacques Courvoisier, La notion d'Eglise chez Bucer dans son développement historique (Paris: Alcan, 1933), pp. 30 ff.

[2] C.R., XXXVIII, 9. [3] Charles Hodge, op. cit., p. 267.

[4] Ibid., p. 130.

sentatives of those who constitute her membership on earth.

Christ "entered into lawful . . . . solemn possession of his Kingdom . . . . when he was exalted to the right hand of the Father. . . . . Christ now sits in glory at the right hand of the Father, and clothed with the highest majesty."[1] The task of Christ involves control of the universe in God's stead; this is a non-soteriological work. But his soteriological task involves a relation to the Church. In the Church "Christ reigns, viz., by keeping us by laws within the range of our duty; and also he rules us by his Spirit."[2] The ecclesiastical government discussed in the previous section has to do with "keeping us by laws within the range of our duty." Christ, absent in heaven, can rule in the Church by those who have charge of Doctrine and Discipline. But in an absolutely necessary sense Christ rules in his Church by his Spirit. Only by the Spirit is a man created anew; only by the Spirit is a man raised to "newness of life." This raising to "newness of life" is regeneration. "By his Spirit Christ regenerates the children of Adam, who had been alienated from God by sin, so that they begin to live a new life."[3] "Regeneration is only begun in this life; the remnant of the flesh which remains yet always follows its own corrupt affections, and thus war is declared against the Spirit."[4] The "continual operation of the Spirit . . . . renews a celestial life in us"; as it does so, it "mortifies little by little the remnants of the flesh."[5]

This operation of Christ's Spirit in the descendants of Adam is, of course, absolutely essential to the realization of the whole aim of God, viz., the renovation of the nature of the Elect so that they may have that degree of excellence of nature once possessed by Adam.

The Kingdom of God, of course, is something other than the Kingdom of Christ. "Christ in rising had made a commencement of the Kingdom of God."[6] A commencement of the Kingdom of God is a commencement of a restoration to the Kingdom of God, for fallen humanity, and of the Kingdom of God in the sense of recovery of the total dominance of the universe for God. The Kingdom of Christ is

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[1] C.R., LXXV, 183. [2] Ibid., LXVII, 67. [3] Ibid., LXXV, 262.
[4] Ibid., LXXXVII, 130. [5] Ibid., p. 146.
[6] Ibid., LXXX, 87.

an expression of dominance over the universe for a specific period: from Creation to Judgment. Christ will carry through his total task, even to the Judgment itself. But he will turn over to God the Father the conquered universe. The Kingdom of Christ ends after the last sentence against the wicked has been pronounced and the last boon of everlasting life has been realized by the Elect.[1] Christ's Kingdom for the duration of time is, of course, included in the Kingdom of God; for God eternally exerts his power, even through Christ. Thus one must understand Calvin when he says that Christ "was sent to erect and prepare a true and perfect state of the Kingdom of God."[2]

It should now be patent what the relation of the Church is to the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Christ. With Adam there began the Church, an instrumentality used of God in his process of selecting those who were to be saved eternally. The worship of the family was primeval; then came the patriarchal, then the aristocratic rule of judges, followed in turn by monarchy. In all these forms of rule the worship of God continued. Under Moses the Church became practically coincident with the State in a special provision of God. Indeed, "the Kingdom which began from David was a kind of prelude and shadowy representation, of that greater grace which was delayed, and held in suspense," until the coming of Christ.[3] Then, the Kingdom of Christ has to do with two things, viz., the Gospel and the society of the godly.[4] God made Christ head of the Church that he might govern by the doctrine of his Gospel.[5] Kingdom has to do with exercise of authority; Church has to do with that over which authority is exercised.

The provisional character of the Visible Church as an institution in time is apparent. Its purpose as collector of the Elect among men on earth having been subserved, the Visible Church will be involved in "the consummation of all things." But in its meaning as the personnel of those who are Elect of God, the Church of course is endless. After the Provisional Church comes realization of the salvation of the Elect in the Ultimate Kingdom.

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[1] B.N., III, 504 f.; C.R., LXXXVII, 549.

[2] Ibid., LXXV, 263.

[3] Ibid., L, 958.

[4] Ibid., XLVI, 157.

[5] Ibid., p. 159.

IV

Christ, the second person of the Trinity, was conceived by Calvin to be in active control of the universe in the exercise of Providence. "The Father governs the world in the person of the Son and exercises dominion by his hand."[1] God in Christ is constantly active in Providence. Creation and conservation are both conceived as exercised by God in Christ.[2] Predestination, however, was presupposed in Providence; it was a providentia specialis. Christ's lifting the Elect out of their reprobate status was deemed a part of Predestination, just as controlling Satan was deemed a part of Providence. Preparation as well as choice of the Elect was involved in Predestination. The Elect by Predestination must be "made fit to obtain immortal life."[3] The relation of Predestination and Christ to the Church is that of foundation and builder to a projected edifice.[4]

V

In Providence a general control of everything in the universe is exercised by Christ; control of the "vulgar" in society through the State is included. But such control affords to the Elect only a preventive protection. There must be a positively constructive work in their cases, if excellence of nature is to be restored. The holy community through its protective discipline makes possible such constructive work; at least it makes the indwelling of the Spirit more definitely effective. Through the community of saints the Elect have their opportunity not only to become united to the "body of Christ" vitally, but also to be developed in a process of growing constantly better in nature through personal effort abetted both by the discipline of the consistory and by the invigoration of the Spirit.

VI

The historical significance of the Church for Calvin was that of a non-sacerdotal institution in which paradoxically every member was conceived to be a priest. But the supernatural effects

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[1] C.R., LXXV, 114.

[2] B.N., III, 85.

[3] Ibid., IV, 381.

[4] C.R., LXXXII, 47.

wrought in any member's life were imagined to be produced wholly by God's Spirit; the environment of the holy community and the values of Education, Sacraments, and Discipline therein afforded were believed to bring the individual only to a point of receptivity, as it were, in relation to the Spirit which actually must give the supernatural effects. In time the Church subserves the function of gathering from a point of view of purely natural means the Elect and of preserving them in a process of encouraged improvement. The future of the Church is bright because of the fact that the preaching of the Word is to be effective in dispelling the darkness of Antichrist and in developing the Elect. God's plan for gathering a specific total of the redeemed is to succeed through the operations of the Church of Christ among men.

VII

In conclusion it is highly important to note that Calvin had no idea of the possibility of the Kingdom of God being realized among men through their own efforts. Nor did he have the idea that there can ever be a time when the Church will be unnecessary. Because of the terrible mutiliation and corruption of human nature in every case and because of the weakening of the will of man through that degradation, Calvin believed it impossible for the Elect to be improved in their nature except by divine coöperation, really by divine initiative in every sense. Not only because of the express desire of God is the Church necessary for the salvation of the Elect; it is necessary furthermore because it affords that essential environment of Education, Sacraments, and Discipline that make possible by the special grace of God the improvement of human nature essential to the salvation of the Elect. The Church in time cannot be annihilated or superseded; when time ends, the Church merges into the Kingdom of God by way of personnel. But on earth and in time the Church in relation to salvation is <u>sine qua non</u>.